

THE RELIGION OF ROBERT BURNS

BY THE REV. JAMES MUIR

I

IF Carlyle be correct in his sweeping statement that Burns "had no religion" at all, then my task is done before it is begun! But the truth seems to be that Burns had at least as much religion as Carlyle, which is not saying much; and, by religion, is meant of course the religion of Jesus Christ. What Burns's religion was, or rather, how far the Christian religion was his, if it was his at all, is the question to be answered now as far as may be possible—a complicated task indeed.

It is a well-established fact that the basis for a true faith, as understood in those days, and for a pure and righteous life by the faith of Jesus Christ, was carefully laid by Burns's excellent Christian parents. Out of her slender store of religious knowledge, his mother gave him, in the elementary stages, what he afterwards denominated "idiot piety." "I congratulate myself," he wrote to Mrs Dunlop, in December 1794, "on having had in my early days religion strongly imprinted on my mind." Not later than his fourteenth year he was introduced by his well-educated father to a reasoned and intelligent exposition—brief and imperfect though it is—of the doctrines of Holy Scripture. This was embodied in a *Manual of Religious Belief*, the joint work, as the writer has come to think, of William Burness and Burns's early instructor, John Murdoch. In the form of question and answer, there is set forth what the poet's father regarded as the essentials of the faith, the sum of his own convictions regarding God, the Christian way of life, and the hopes of a life to come.¹

Though the little compendium be fragmentary and defective, even as a document reflecting the average theology of its own period, it yet points with a measure of clearness to some of the main tenets of the Christian faith. It has nothing to say of the Fatherhood of God or the brotherhood of man in Christ Jesus; it lacks altogether the love-note and the joy-note of the gospel; it savours more of the Old Testament

¹ See the *Manual* in Appendix, Vol. IV, of *The Works of Robert Burns*, by Wm. Scott Douglas, pp. 341–6, or *The Book of Robert Burns*, by the Rev. Charles Rogers, D.D., LL.D., III, 310–14, Appendix B.

than of the New ; its has more of legality in it than of the grace of God ; it has no intimacy of Godwardness ; no suggestion of sacramental inwardness ; not a scintilla of the mysticism of the Christ-relation ; no glimpse of the everyday walk with, and growing likeness to Christ ; no reference to spiritual rebirth in express terms, or to the heavenly world. Yet, all imperfect as it is, it may be said to have been sufficient in its own day—as we cannot but think it was in the case of the poet's brother, Gilbert—to set a young man upon the heavenly quest, to link him up securely with God through Jesus Christ, and to urge him to the task of life-long character-building. Here, we may take it, we have laid bare for us the doctrinal contents of Burns's faith till his twentieth year or later.

Dr William Taylor of Norwich, the notorious sceptic, had found in him an apt pupil ; and the essay on " The Death of Christ," by the Rev. Dr William M'Gill of the Old Parish Church of Ayr, regarded by the evangelicals as " heretical, damnable error," secured his entire sympathy. The destructive work, *The Age of Reason*, by Thomas Paine, that out-and-out advocate of religious revolt, came into the poet's hands in the Dumfries period, and served to confirm him in his hostility to the standard theology of the day.

We can discern two influences powerfully at work, tending at once to sever the poet from his early faith-moorings, and to cast him into the arms of these revolutionary thinkers : (1) His growing dissatisfaction with the most prevalent pulpit-teaching of the day, that of ultra-Calvinism (Old Lights), associated as it was with men and women of the " ranter " type, like the Brownists of Irvine, and with the " Holy Willies " in the ministry and out of it ; and, to some extent, with the " cauld harangues " of the " New Lights " or Moderates, the pulpiteers of scholarship, but of little spiritual warmth or enlightenment ; (2) The immense deterioration of his own moral code and condition, coupled with an only too great intimacy with men and women alike religionless and godless. To these may be added his natural bent towards independence, almost lawlessness, of thought ; his strength and pride of reason ; his growing hatred of dogma and the creed of the Church ; his itch to liberalise and rationalise the contents of the faith and of the preaching of its ordained servants ; and his conceit to stand with the greater minds in literature. By all this his mind was whelmed in a turmoil of doubt and uncertainty. Though never a profound thinker, or an intimate, thorough knower of theological questions, he had, he tells us, " reasoned and doubted to a very daring pitch." Probably he had never fully reasoned out any theological position or problem to a legitimate conclusion ; neither can it be claimed that he ever attempted to set forth in completeness the contents of his remanent, much-shrunk faith, or the reasons for his doubt.

II

The evidence which we have reveals the later mind of Burns :

1. On God, the greatest of all subjects, his belief seems to have remained remarkably steadfast ; and yet it must be said that his conception of the Deity is a curious amalgam. To him, on one side, God was a Being to be revered—

“ The great Creator to adore
Must sure become the creature ”—

beneficent and kind, not willing that any should perish but that *all* should come to everlasting life, great and supremely powerful, All-Good, Heaven's Eternal King, Omniscient, the Source of Life, our Author and Preserver, the Creator of all that is, the ultimate but most merciful Judge, to whom all men are accountable ; but, on the other side, unknown, incomprehensible, awful, an obscure reality dwelling remote and operating by natural laws alone. In all this conception of God Burns betrays a certain affinity to the Deists or Theists or even the Rationalists, but there is not a trace, in anything he ever wrote, of Atheism or Secularism. Nevertheless he and those of his way of thinking would, the writer thinks, have said—“ Be careful to keep an awful interval between God and you. He is wrapped in mystery : wrap Him in more rather than less—this God who is said to be ‘ light, and in whom is no darkness at all ’ ! To do otherwise would be to destroy, or at least lessen, the reverence due to the Divine Majesty. If you do venture to love Him, take care not to be too presuming or froward, too sentimental, too enthusiastic [as that word was understood in his day], too familiar and near.” In this connection we naturally remember the complaint of the Jews against Jesus that He had dared to call God His Father ! We never find Burns applying to God the tender title of Heavenly Father, though probably in prayer he would often use it.

2. Burns separates himself, most widely and radically, from Christian doctrine and the teaching of the New Testament in his conception of Jesus Christ. “ Jesus Christ ! ” he wrote, “ thou amiablest of characters ! I trust thou art no impostor, and that thy revelation of blissful scenes of existence beyond death and the grave is not one of the many impositions, which, time after time, have been palmed on credulous mankind. . . . I trust,” he adds incongruously, “ that in thee shall *all* the families of the earth be blest.”¹ Burns, it would seem, had no glimpse whatever of what may be called spiritual pregnancy for the individual, the begetment and conception of a reborn soul by a union of the Divine with the human through Christ—the emergence of a life from a low, carnal plane to rise to a higher plane, pure, spiritual, and heavenly.

¹ Letter to Mrs Dunlop, December 13, 1789.

In another letter to Mrs Dunlop, dated June 21, 1789, we find a highly revealing reference to the poet's mental measure of the Christ. "I will go further," he wrote, "and affirm that, from the sublimity, excellence and purity of his doctrine and precepts, unparalleled by all the aggregate wisdom and learning of many preceding ages—though, *to appearance*, he himself was the obscurest and most illiterate of our species—therefore Jesus Christ was from God." And then, there is that remarkable letter to Clarinda, January 8, 1788: "The Supreme Being has put the immediate administration of all this [*i.e.* the affairs of this world and the next] for wise and good ends known to himself—into the hands of Jesus Christ, whose relation to him we cannot comprehend, but whose relationship to us is that of a Guide and Saviour, and who, except for our obstinacy and misconduct, will bring us *all*, through various ways, to bliss at last."

In these three testimonies we note :

1. That Jesus is represented as the "amiablest of characters" (merely human), but not as the perfect Man or Son of God, not "God manifest in the flesh," yet a possible "impostor," though Burns "trusts" He is not! 2. That, though Jesus was "the most illiterate of our species," His doctrine is reckoned as "far excelling the wisdom and learning of many preceding ages" [an astounding miracle surely!]: that, though not God, He was "from God." 3. That Jesus, appointed as God's administrator in regard to the human race, is also man's "Guide and Saviour." What connotation exactly Burns gave to the last of these functions—"Saviour"—one can only surmise. Certainly there is nothing in the name, as ordinarily understood, in common with his teaching elsewhere. 4. That Burns had strong leanings, issuing from a very vital chord in his own nature, to the doctrine of the Universalist.

"Dear Christless Bobby" were the words with which his intimate friend, William Nicol, once addressed him in a letter, February 10, 1793, and there was a good deal of truth in the appellation.

III

Next, we turn to the poet's conception of the soul, which sometimes he seems to identify, or confuse, with what he calls "the senses of the mind." "We know nothing or next to nothing," he said, "of the substance or structure of our souls. . . ." "Do they form," he asks in a letter to Mrs Dunlop, 1789, "a piece of machinery, which, like the Æolian harp, passive, takes the impression of the passing accident? Or do these workings argue something within us above the trodden clod?" Or again, "If that part of us called mind *does* survive the apparent destruction of man he goes to a great unknown Being." There is here no

confession of the immortality of the soul, nor of its ultimate fate depending upon a Saviour. Rather is the whole matter looked upon as a question of the function and operation of the soul now, or it is left at the question mark as to a future state. It has to be admitted, however, that there are a few stray testimonies to the effect that Burns held the immortality of the soul to be "a great reality."

This leads naturally to his views of the hereafter, heaven and the Judgment. "Hell" is not mentioned here, though Burns was intensely interested, not in it only, but in him who is said to preside over that dark domain. As a Universalist, he had really no place for it in his scheme of belief.

To Burns heaven was, in the main, no more than a great *perhaps*. He speaks, in a letter to Robert Muir, of "the mysteries beyond the veil" as "enveloped in the gloom profound of primeval chaos." "If there is another world of weal or woe," he said—"though I own myself partial to the belief that there is, the dark suspicion occasionally haunts me that immortality may be only too good news to be true." Setting aside revelation in the matter, he had apparently concluded that a future state of existence was at least probable; but he had attained to no certainty of faith. He hoped, and longed to believe, no more, though that, for such a one as he, was much to say.

The cognate question meets us here: Whom did Burns regard as worthy and sure of heaven, if it be allowed that there *is* a heaven? His answer was—"the worthy of this life," the honest, the just, the amiable, the benevolent, the humane. "An honest man," he said, "has nothing to fear." Honesty, honour, charity, sympathy, brotherly kindness—these, to him, were the marks of a religious man, a man acceptable in God's sight; these were the titles to a heaven beyond death and the grave. It was all a matter of human merit, and may be a little of the mercy of God. For him, the Christ-way of salvation was not a way to God and His glory. And here we cannot but express wonder that one like Burns, so well versed in the teachings of the New Testament, had not acquired or accepted more of its light and consolation. His heart, in respect of redemption and the essentiality of the sacrifice of Christ and faith in it for a happy immortality, "kept," as he said, "its native incorrigibility."

"The Bible," he tells us, he "sincerely believed"; but, in judging of it, he was "drawn by the conviction of a man, not by the halter of an ass." And yet he declares: "I am convinced that an unshaken faith in the doctrines of religion [whatever he meant by these: perhaps the contents of Holy Scripture as interpreted by himself] is necessary by making us better men and happier"; and "I felicitate the man who has such a never-failing anchor of hope when he looks beyond the grave." Anyway it is clear that our poet had drifted far from the standpoint of

his father's *Manual of Religious Belief* in respect of the Bible as a revelation of God.

IV

In view of all this, it is not surprising that Burns, though an interested, if critically-minded frequenter of the house of God all his life, was in full revolt against the Church as it functioned in his day. "I know," he wrote, "some who laugh at the subject of religion as the trick of the crafty FEW to lead the undiscerning MANY, or at most as an uncertain obscurity which mankind can never know anything of, and with which they are fools if they give themselves much to do." To Cunningham he wrote: "If there be any truth in the orthodox faith of the Churches, I am damned past redemption, and, what is worse, damned to all eternity."

In his eyes, the system of creeds, and the pulpit presentations of the contents of these creeds, seemed false and rotten. Calvinism was his pet aversion, though specific evidence is not forthcoming of his particular reasons why. The "Auld Licht" believer was a horror, compounded of credulity, stupidity, and self-righteousness. He thought that a "profession of piety," such as was made by the intenser evangelicals, was "apt to degenerate into cant and hypocrisy," both of which he held in detestation.

These reasons, adverse to Calvinism, may have had to do with the doctrine of election or predestination (not as set forth, say, in the Westminster Confession, but as preached from many of the pulpits of the time), a doctrine entirely repugnant to his innate sense of things. Hell, too, with its implicates of everlasting damnation and unending torture, was presumably a tenet from which his sensitive soul recoiled as cruelly unjust to imperfect mortals and unworthy of a good God. It was a tenet which, as he often protested, was pushed by its preachers to a horrible extreme, on the presumption that it might "haud the wretch in order." Setting no store by Divine Revelation or by Christ as Redeemer, relying for his conclusions, as was the case, entirely upon reason, common sense, and the light of nature; assured also, as he was, of the ultimate salvation of the race—he chose the perilous way of independent thought and the tender heart, bravely taking all the risks, and reaping a sad harvest of uncertainty and a constant eclipse of the spirit. Disbelieving in the divinity of Christ, and evidently having no place in his attenuated creed for the Holy Spirit, he ignored the doctrine of the Trinity, and scouted the idea of salvation through faith in the Christ. Hence it is not surprising that we have no mention of his ever having sat at the Lord's Table in his later years, though probably enough he did in the years before his drift into the Unitarian or Deistic position.

It is, however, when we come to Burns's religion, as exhibited on the human plane, that we see how deeply and truly religious he was in the region of the practical and the actual now. Believing that

"The heart benevolent and kind
The most resembles God,"

he stood to his fellow-creatures, in the main, in the attitude of warm philanthropy, of fervent charity and all-embracing love. He gave this as a short summary of his humanitarian creed—"Whatever mitigates the woes or increases the happiness of others—this is my criterion of goodness; and whatever injures society at large or any individual in it—this is my measure of iniquity." It is not to be said that he could not hate, aye, and with terrible inveteracy at times, but his hatred, reserved for the hypocrite and the man of inhumanity, tended always to vanish sooner or later in poignant regret. "Love," it has been said, "was to him a religion." But, if love to his fellow-man is the virtue most outstanding in his strangely composite moral character, we must place next to it the virtue of honesty. With Pope he deemed "the honest man the noblest work of God"—

"The honest man though e'er sae poor
Is king o' men, for a' that.

The social, friendly, honest man,
Whate'er he be,
'Tis he fulfils great Nature's plan,
And none but he."

No poet or writer ever placed honesty on a higher pedestal than Burns, and he was ever an honourable example of this article in his humanitarian creed. Though his religion did not make for "the crucifixion of the flesh with its affections and lusts," nor for the control of that habit of intemperance which played such terrible havoc with his own life and genius, there were other moral excellences in his character, such as manliness, humaneness, fortitude, honour, unselfishness, which entitle him to rank high as an all-round man.

It would be entirely absurd to say, as has sometimes been said, that Burns revolutionised the theology of his day. Rather should it be said that he ruthlessly exposed its crudities and absurdities, chiefly in individuals,¹ and so helped to pave the way for a more liberal and enlightened

¹ "All hail, Religion! maid divine!
Pardon a Muse sae mean as mine,
Who, in her rough, imperfect line,
Thus daurs to name thee;
To stigmatise false friends of thine
Can ne'er defame thee."

(To the Rev. John M'Math, enclosing a copy of "Holy Willie's Prayer.")

view of the things of God and the destiny of man. He held up to merited contempt the beliefs that made men double-minded, false to God, inhuman to their fellows, uncharitable to the weak, the wayward and erring, the blind and uninstructed. For this, Scotland owes him an incalculable debt, which is not yet entirely redeemed.

Carlyle held that there was "no temple in his understanding." "Burns," he says, "lived in darkness and in the shadow of doubt; his religion, at the best, was an anxious wish: like that of Rabelais, a great perhaps." And Robert Louis Stevenson said: "Burns all his life was on a voyage of discovery and never reached a haven of rest." In both pronouncements there is doubtless much of truth, as well as something not wholly true: they were made by men of religious convictions wonderfully similar to his own. Nevertheless Burns will go down to posterity as a man of a God-fearing mind, a lover of his kind, a natural poetic genius dwelling near to Nature's heart, a soul groping bravely, sincerely, though in much travail, after the truth that maketh free.

